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FOR A/S FRAZER AND DAS YAMAMOTO
NAIROBI FOR SOMALIA WATCHER

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SUBJECT: THE ISLAMISTS BATTLE FOR BAIDOA AND BEYOND

Classified By: CHARGE VICKI HUDDLESTON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: Prime Minister Meles met with Admiral Rick Hunt, DATT Don Zedler and Charge at our request October 30. We were particularly concerned by reports of the Council of Islamic Courts' (CIC) military preparations for an attack on Baidoa, and the possibility that even with Ethiopian military assistance, the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in Baidoa might fall when faced with the CIC's Al Qaeda-linked and Jihad-motivated troops known as the al Shebab. Meles reasoned that while the CIC is now stronger than the TFG, the balance can be corrected. By stopping the CIC before its ideology becomes entrenched outside Mogadishu, Somalis who are not driven by the austere ideology of fundamentalism will be ready to dialogue with the TFG and become part of the Transitional Federal Institutions. Meles' fear is that the CIC is being pushed by al Shebab to attack Baidoa in the coming days. If this occurs, the GOE will not yet be ready to push the CIC back. Rather, they will defend Baidoa to the end. When the rains end by mid-November, Ethiopia will be ready for a second phase of operations, which would use the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) as the cutting edge to go after al Shebab and push the CIC back to Mogadishu. Meles hopes that a UNSC resolution lifting the arms embargo on the TFG and authorizing IGASOM will be forthcoming before mid-November so that the TFG can protect itself with international backing and Ethiopia can reinforce them. Meles pointed out that there are many friendly southern Somalis, as well as Puntland and Somaliland, that welcome Ethiopia's commitment. We are watching with considerable concern as the CIC surround Baidoa. This concern is only enhanced by the growing recruitment and strength of the militant al Shebab and its close ties to the East African al Qaeda branch. We find it difficult not to agree with Meles that the CIC has no interest in dialogue with the TFG when they see a complete victory at hand. Even more worrisome is the fact that Ethiopia, while committed to defending Baidoa, is not as well positioned to do so. In fact, as Meles pointed out, Ethiopia's advantage lies in its mobility but its tanks are hampered not only by the rainy season but by lack of information about where al Shebab (the real enemy), its technicals, and its missiles are located. We were not reassured to hear Meles say that Ethiopia does not yet have a concept of operations. If Ethiopia and the TFG lose Baidoa, the CIC, and especially al Shebab, will be empowered and will attract more domestic and foreign fighters, as well as more arms and resources. Puntland will be its next target,

followed by Somaliland. As al Shebab fighters move forward, so too will militant Islam. Meles asked if we can help. Hopefully we can do so in discrete but meaningful ways, because in the end this is our battle as well. End Summary

12. (C) On October 30 CJTF-HOA Commander Admiral Hunt presented to Prime Minister Meles his thoughts about the Somalia situation, including the need for an exit strategy and a clear idea of the desired end state that Ethiopia, the Horn and the African Union would find satisfactory. He asked what would happen next if Baidoa were to fall to the Islamic Courts, and queried the PM about ways in which Puntland and Somaliland could withstand both the ideological and military thrust of the CIC. He urged Ethiopia to review its strategic considerations and move cautiously as the CIC, especially the al Qaeda-linked al Shebab are a determined enemy. Hunt asked whether there were ways in which the USG might promote an improved environment that would result in negotiations and avoid conflict, perhaps by encouraging the Mogadishu business community to play a moderating role.

NEED TO SHIFT THE BALANCE OF POWER TO BACK TO TFG

13. (C) Meles thanked Hunt for his observations, and then pointed to the structural imbalance between the TFG and the CIC. He said the TFG is disadvantaged by the lack of a motivating force because it is not clan based. This means that TFG President Youseff must negotiate everything among the clans, thus there is little cohesion. Worse, without the motivation of clan or ideology the TFG will remain weak in the face of its enemies. Permanently shifting clan alliances

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also weaken the TFG. The Rahanwein -- who are the majority in Baidoa shift alliances because historically they have been maltreated by other clans. As a result, their political antenna is highly attuned to who holds the money and arms that can assure them of ending up on the winning side. An additional weakness for the TFG is that the Hawiye are displeased that the Darood hold the presidency, possibly explaining the logic of Hawiye involvement in the assassination attempt on Youseff. According to Meles, a close relative of an important Hawiye was the suicide bomber.

The CIC motivation being both clan and ideology is only somewhat weakened by the fact that Somalis are not naturally attracted to the strict ideology of radical Islam. The majority of the CIC is driven by clan loyalty, but the expanding Al Shebab militants linked with Al Qaeda are driven by radical Muslim ideology.

14. (C) Meles complained that the TFG was sapped from inside by these conflicting loyalties and lack of strong outside support. At the same time, Meles said that the TFG remains critical because it provides the long-term answer for Somalia -- the transitional federal institutions serve as the basis for building domestic and international legitimacy. "Politically, the TFG is not mobilized," Meles emphasized. The job of the international community -- and Ethiopia -- is to compensate for the imbalance between the TFG and the CIC. The advantage of Puntland and Somaliland, which Meles sees as the last line of defense against the CIC, is their clan affiliations and their common history of success and failures around which they can rally. At this point, Meles said, it is critical to "beef-up" Somaliland and Puntland economically so that they can withstand the coming attack from the CIC. Meles said the USG could be instrumental in providing humanitarian (and developmental) support that would reinforce these independent regions. The TFG could also be strengthened for the long term if it has access to resources, the PM claimed. Therefore the USG might encourage the Europeans to make available the fifteen million euros given to the African Union for Somalia.

15. (C) More critically, the gains of the CIC must be

reversed. According to Meles, the CIC's strength has been reinforced by disarming of the militias of the businessmen, undercutting the potential for opposition in southern Somalia. "The CIC is fired up by its victories and the difficulties the USG faces in Iraq and Afghanistan," Meles said. The CIC hard-liner leaders understand that clans cannot form the base of their movement and are being replaced by the ideology-based al Shebab. (Comment: Post understands that there is an effort by al Shebab to recruit clan militias to radical Islam. We also understand that some clans are asking foreign donors to send arms directly to them so as to avoid becoming subservient to a radical ideology or al Shebab. End comment.)

CIC WILL NOT NEGOTIATE UNTIL STOPPED MILITARILY

16. (C) Meles said that the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) strategy would be to push the CIC back to Mogadishu, the only place where the radical Islamic ideology is entrenched. The longer the delay in pushing back the CIC, the greater the range of conversion. For now, however, the only area where they are entrenched is Mogadishu. The best case scenario, according to Meles, is that the businessmen and other pragmatic elements in Mogadishu would split if the CIC were bottled up in Mogadishu. This would allow dialogue with the TFG and moderate CIC elements to move forward. "Right now, the Jihadists would have to be stupid to dialogue with a weakened and surrounded TFG. Their objective is only to legitimize themselves so they can take power," Meles stated. Meles recalled that although the TPLF and other rebels wanted the USG on their side when they were about to defeat Ethiopia's former Derg regime, they saw no reason to negotiate power sharing when it was evident to the rebels that they could completely defeat the Derg. Meles warned that the international community should not bank on dialogue at this point when the CIC is sure that victory is at hand. One of the reasons the Arab League is biased toward the CIC is

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because of the imbalance between the CIC and the TFG. Therefore the balance of power must change to favor the TFG if the TFG is to succeed.

KEY TO VICTORY: FINDING AL SHEBAB UNITS

17. (C) At the end of the rainy season -- mid-November or a bit later, as rains have been unusually heavy -- Ethiopia can move to redress the military balance between the TFG and the CIC, Meles said. Meles said that an attack on Baidoa by the CIC could come at any moment given that they have troops only a few miles away from the city; however, the rains may prevent the attack. Meles stated strongly that if the CIC does attack Baidoa, Ethiopia would be acting legally to help the TFG confront the attack and push the CIC back to Mogadishu. Meles plans to use the ENDF as "the cutting edge" fighting with al Shebab and the Islamists, not the clans. The Somalis could then "pick up the pieces," and liberate southern Somalia Meles said. Outside humanitarian and developmental resources could then build up the transitional federal institutions, making them more capable and representative. Radical Islam would be marginalized, but not ousted. "That will be a matter of years," Meles warned.

18. (C) When Charge asked the Prime Minister if he were sure that Ethiopia could win, Meles replied that defeat was unlikely but there are always imponderables. The strength of the ENDF rests on its mobility; therefore its success may well be linked to whether it can determine the location of the al Shebab Islamist forces, explosives, shoulder held missiles, Eritrean "egla" missiles, technicals and the ability of CIC to mine areas of operation. Meles concluded by saying that "we can manage, but if the CIC has Eritrea

"egla" missiles, it could have a major influence on our helos." Most importantly, Meles emphasized, would be to know where the hard core elements are located. "If we know this, we can fight in specific areas and the local militias can disperse. We should not fight these groups, but to ensure that we do not we will have to know where the al Shebab is located," Meles explained.

¶9. (C) Meles said that given these factors it is difficult to come up with a concept of operations. If the USG can assist in any way - specifically intelligence - to counter the growing al Shebab terrorist influence, Ethiopia would be grateful. Meles also asked if the USG would discretely talk with the Europeans and the UN so that they would not condemn Ethiopia's actions. If they condemn Ethiopia, Meles said, "it will stiffen the Jihadists." He added, "we will protect Baidoa to the very last - there will be no retreat from Baidoa." In response to the Charge's query, Meles said that if the CIC attacked before ENDF troops could respond with a push out of Baidoa, it would likely result in a two-phase action. First would come the battle for Baidoa, which would begin with a CIC attack; then this would be followed by a wider campaign led by the TFG and ENDF -- if no diplomatic solution is found -- in mid- to late November. Once the CIC was bottled up in Mogadishu, perhaps US pressure might help shut off the money coming in to the CIC from Dubai, he added.

CIC COUNTING ON INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNATION OF ETHIOPIA

¶10. (C) When Charge asked why the CIC would attack Baidoa if it meant an Ethiopia/TFG response, Meles said that the CIC wants to provoke Ethiopia into a war in Somalia so the EU and the US will pressure Ethiopia to stop. But some in the CIC are not so sure that the US and EU will make that recommendation, and others doubt Ethiopia will bend to pressure. In response to the Charge's urging, Meles reiterated his previous statements that Ethiopia wants to wait for the UNSC to lift the embargo on the TFG and authorize IGASOM. Although this allows the CIC to acquire more arms and expertise, Ethiopia also needs to prepare its logistics in any case. A greater danger than an arms build-up in the CIC is the spread of Islamist Jihad ideology, Meles argued. For now, Ethiopia has friends in Somalia as

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well as in Puntland and Somaliland that are determined not to fall to that ideology. Meles concluded that he looks forward to many more conversations and communications on this topic.
HUDDLESTON